

Section 2 Background

2.2.4 Natural Environmental Test Program

The Natural Environmental Test Program (NETP) was conducted in the 1950s to evaluate the effects of long-term storage of atomic weapons in natural environments. Representative samples of different weapons containing plutonium and enriched uranium were subjected to natural arctic, desert, and tropical environments. The SSTB was chosen as the site for the desert phase of the program. Some weapons were evaluated at all four natural environmental test sites, while others remained at the SSTB during the entire test program.

The Dog Site Building (Building 4070, Sites 7 and 9) was constructed in 1954 to support the NETP activities. The building was used for environmental testing of weapons and maintenance, and for recording data. The weapons were tested by exposure to natural conditions outside. Different types of storage protection were used. Weapons components, including mechanisms containing depleted uranium and explosives, were disassembled, inspected, and reassembled in the building to evaluate the effects of environmental exposure. The weapons did not contain fissionable materials (i.e., enriched uranium, plutonium) (Sandia 1994c). The test program was completed in November 1959.

2.2.5 Project Mercury Testing

North American Aircraft, Inc. (under contract to McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Corporation) conducted tests of the Project Mercury space capsule from the summer of 1959 through August 1960. The purpose of the tests was to evaluate the capsule parachute landing system utilizing the tracking cameras and extensive water area of the SSTB.

2.2.6 Aeroballistic Test Unit Recovery

The Navy conducted underwater salvage activities to remove test unit weapon debris from the Site 10 Marine Target. The salvage operations included visual surveys by scuba divers, and were conducted in three phases between September 1960 and May 1961. More than 10,000 pounds of material and at least one complete weapon prototype were recovered and returned to the Sandia facility in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for identification. In a June 15 1961 report to the AEC, Sandia indicated that the impact sites had been sufficiently searched to eliminate all security risks (NEESA 1993).

2.2.7 Navy Reacquisition

Beginning in August 1957, certain facilities at the SSTB were returned to the Navy. The Navy was provided use of the SSTB as an emergency seadrome as well as quarters and subsistence for a four-man Navy crew based at the Salton Sea. The Navy also used dock space and seaplane mooring buoys at the base.

The Navy reassumed custody of the SSTB on March 19 1964, with the understanding that the AEC material (i.e., test units) not recovered from the marine target during the test